

## HISTORY REPEATING ITSELF

### Passing, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, and *The President's Daughter*

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*The nineteenth-century fascination with mixture corresponded with racial segregation, "sciences" of purity, and white supremacy; how do you know that history is not just repeating itself?*

– Suzanne Bost

This article analyses Barbara Chase-Riboud's rarely-examined *The President's Daughter* (1994) in the context of the resurfacing of passing narratives in the contemporary moment, emphasising the indebtedness of such narratives to Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894). The story of the mixed-race daughter of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, Chase-Riboud's novel is not the first African-American-authored text to engage this subject, an honour belonging to William Wells Brown in his novel *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter* (1853). Although Chase-Riboud acknowledges Brown's *Clotel* in *Sally Hemings* (1979) and in the title to and pages of its sequel, her 1994 novel in fact owes more to Twain's novella than it does to either its mother-text or to Brown's novel. When, in the 1860s, an abolitionist friend presents Harriet Hemings with Brown's novel, Harriet undergoes the uncanny experience of reading her own "biography," which is fiction (*The President's Daughter* 327). She subsequently remarks that "If I was fiction," then "this country was fiction. Was I plausible? You tell me" (446). If her encounter with Brown's novel forces her to consider the point at which the distinction between biography and fiction collapses, her self-conception as "fiction" evokes more readily Twain's configuration of race as "a fiction of law and custom" and Roxy's "fiction created by herself" in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (7).

What is at stake with these borrowings from and revisions to Twain's *fin-de-siècle* ur-text in *The President's Daughter*, and, indeed, in the reappearance of the trope of racial passing in contemporary culture more generally, is a sense that, at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, there has been a resurgence of the fascination with mixed race figures – traditionally the focus of racial passing stories – that characterised the 1890s. Coded as disquiet in the late-nineteenth century and celebration in the late twentieth, Suzanne Bost argues that in both periods, "fear and celebration work in tandem: the fascination with mixture corresponds to (and potentially masks) racist efforts to contain fluidity and to reinstitute categories" (185). Chase-Riboud's references to Twain's novel are effective because revisiting a narrative of passing *in another narrative of passing* one hundred years later reinforces at a formal level the key question posed by Bost, in Chase-Riboud's novel thematically, and in this article: *is* (literary) history repeating itself? This discussion sets *The President's Daughter* alongside Twain's novella, arguing that, after announcing such concerns epigraphically, Chase-Riboud revisits central motifs from and themes of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* – twinning, the nature/nurture debate and fingerprints – throughout the novel. Her engagement with Twain's novella reflects an ongoing investment in issues of mixed-race identity and passing that belies the supposed datedness of such concerns.

### **"Passing" Into the Present**

Although the term *passing* is increasingly used to denote a wide range of performative practices, from its origins it referred most commonly to "passing as white." A prevalent trope in white- and later black-authored fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, passing, according to Juda Bennett, no longer seems to engage contemporary novelists: "The long list of authors from the first half of the twentieth century [. . .] is hardly balanced by the short list of contemporary writers who have addressed this figure of racial ambiguity" (205).

The "short list" which Bennett provides consists of Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982), Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998), Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth* (1999) and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000) (214). Although Bennett argues that Toni Morrison evokes the passing myth "without actually representing the phenomenon of passing, and in this way Morrison decenters and deforms the passing figure" (205), he fails to take account of other African-American authors who are engaged in similar projects, particularly Paul Beatty in *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) and Percival Everett in *Erasure* (2001), and, indeed, the continued pervasiveness of the trope of racial passing in United States popular culture, notably in Showtime's *The L Word* (2004) and the FX reality TV show *Black. White.* (2006).

My chief contention is that representations of racial passing – in whatever form(s) they may take – return at those moments in which there is a renewed interest in the mixed-race body as an entity that may both defy *and* shore up racial boundaries. The mixed-race figure is thus the locus, to paraphrase Bost, of both fear *and* celebration. The ends of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, during which *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *The President's Daughter* appeared respectively, are two such moments. As Eric Sundquist has argued convincingly, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is embedded in debates leading up to the infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling (1896), which effectively enshrined in law the separation of white from African-American bodies in public spaces. A test case, the events were, of course, set in motion by pale-skinned African American Homer Plessy's boarding of a whites-only train carriage in Louisiana in 1892. Meanwhile, the closing years of the twentieth century and early years of the twenty-first bore witness to what Eve Allegra Raimon describes as "a renewal and rearticulation of the United States's long-standing fascination with interracialism" (1), which was no more vividly evident than in the discussions surrounding the possibility of including a multiracial category in the United States Census in 2000.

Contemporary narratives of passing refute conventional literary historiography, which typically associates passing with a period stretching from post-Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement (1890s to 1960s) or, even more specifically, the years of the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> Werner Sollors observes that racial passing was "swept aside in social history by the civil rights movement, and in literature by the combined successes of Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright, who no longer employed the theme" (284). According to Gayle Wald, by the time John Howard Griffin's memoir, *Black Like Me*, appeared in 1961, "passing was already beginning to 'pass' out of style for African Americans, going the way of Jim Crow buses and segregated lunch counters" (23). Indeed, Wald's identification of Griffin's white-to-black passing narrative of the early 1960s as the endpoint of black-to-white passing would appear to confirm Doris Black's claim in *Sepia* magazine in 1972 that "in a new era when highly visible blackness has become important in management and executive employment," being a light-skinned African American able to pass as white is "a handicap." Black continues that "Now the only passing that is prevalent [sic] is from white to black" (66). However, narratives of black-to-white passing did not disappear after the 1960s, though they have not received the same degree of critical attention devoted to their predecessors. While some studies refer anecdotally to contemporary narratives of passing – Wald concludes her monograph with a brief discussion of *Caucasia* and Kathleen Pfeiffer references *The Human Stain* in closing her book – none explores recent passing stories to account for their resurgence at the end of the twentieth century. None, moreover, engages with Chase-Riboud's *The President's Daughter* as a passing narrative.

The specific resonances of Twain's text have also been "passed" over in existing studies. Although Sundquist notes that "African American authors have responded powerfully to *Pudd'nhead Wilson*" (226-27) and lists the work of Charles W. Chesnutt, Pauline E. Hopkins, James Weldon Johnson, and George Schuyler as examples, the influence

of Twain's enigmatic text on contemporary narratives of racial passing and masquerade has yet to be identified and theorised. This article offers itself as a partial response to Shelley Fisher Fishkin's observation that "Potential parallels, prefigurings, echoes, influences, and other links between Mark Twain and African-American writers deserve more attention than they have received" (140). From the epigraph to *Erasure* to the yoking together of plots of passing, murder, and detection in *The Human Stain*, from the playfully-named pet dog Pudd'nhead in *Caucasia* (161) to the Compton Tannenberry/Franz von Compton anecdote in *The White Boy Shuffle* (17), allusions to and revisions of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* are no more emphatically or convincingly realised than in Chase-Riboud's *The President's Daughter*.<sup>2</sup>

### **"Imitating" *Pudd'nhead*: Theorising the Twain/Chase-Riboud Relationship**

*The President's Daughter* imagines the life of Harriet Hemings, the only daughter of Jefferson and Hemings to survive beyond infancy. Upon reaching the age of twenty-one, Harriet is permitted to leave Monticello in 1822 – to "stroll" – without being formally manumitted by her father. In the company of Jefferson's former *majordomo*, Adrian Petit, Harriet goes to Philadelphia, passes as white and twice marries white. She bears seven children, survives two sons who perish in the Civil War, and finally dies aged seventy-five after attempting unsuccessfully to confess her "true" origins to her granddaughter, Roxanne, who, given the other nods to *Pudd'nhead Wilson* in *The President's Daughter*, is likely named for Twain's Roxana. Indeed, just as Twain's Roxy passes Tom Driscoll and Chambers off as black and white, respectively, in the interests of securing a better future for her son, so Chase-Riboud's Roxanne conceals her grandmother's genealogy by destroying her diaries after her death "for the sake of our posterity" (454).

Existing theories of literary influence and intertextuality are inadequate models for the project that Chase-Riboud undertakes in *The President's Daughter*. Her engagement with

Twain's text is too obviously critical to be considered a straightforward case of literary influence, while the association of intertextuality with the "death of the author" does not do justice to the degree of self-consciousness involved on Chase-Riboud's part.<sup>3</sup> More pertinent is Linda Hutcheon's elucidation of the postmodern subgenre of historiographic metafiction, or "novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (5). For Hutcheon, the revisiting of the past in such texts "is not a nostalgic return; it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past" (4). In the Afterword to *The President's Daughter*, Chase-Riboud echoes the postmodern view that "[w]ritten history is *always* interpreted through a writer's sensibility and therefore inevitably fictionalized" (458). Chase-Riboud participates in the postmodern enterprise of revealing the close relationship between fiction and history as textual constructs by framing her "'fictional' biography" of a "nonfictional personage" – the daughter of a historical Founding Father, Thomas Jefferson – in terms of her revisions to a work of fiction by a literary founding father, Mark Twain.

If general theories of influence and intertextuality fall short in relation to *The President's Daughter*, analyses of African-American women writers' interactions with their own or other traditions are also lacking. This is no doubt attributable, to some extent, to the academic context in which many of these works were produced. Michael Awkward's *Inspiriting Influences* (1989), Henry Louis Gates's *Signifying Monkey* (1989), Karla Holloway's *Moorings and Metaphors* (1992), and Houston A. Baker's *Workings of the Spirit* (1993) were the outcome of a concerted effort on the part of African-American scholars in the late 1980s and early 1990s to assert the legitimacy of African-American texts within a white-dominated canon. Thus, when Holloway looks to the metaphor of the goddess/ancestor in her study of the interplay of West-African and African-American women's texts, while not a particularly helpful apparatus for considering the Twain/Chase-Riboud relationship, her

critical impetus must be understood in relation to Holloway's conviction that "the black woman's text and its language" have been "short-changed by this highly charged battle for space" (5).<sup>4</sup>

In a similar vein to Holloway, Henry Louis Gates draws upon West-African myths in his elucidation of the figures of Esu-Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey in *The Signifying Monkey* (1989). Gates's elaboration in the same work of four sorts of "double-voiced textual relations" in the African-American literary tradition is particularly useful for theorising the Twain/Chase-Riboud relationship. One of these – tropological revision – refers to the way in which "a specific trope is repeated, with differences, between two or more texts." Examples that Gates offers are the descent underground, the vertical "ascent" from South to North, and the "ur-trope of the tradition" of the Talking Book (xxv). One trope that Gates neglects to mention, however, is that of racial passing, although he almost does so when he observes that as early as 1941, the editors of *The Negro Caravan*, an early work of African-American literary criticism, identified echoes of Brown's *Clotel* in Frances E. W. Harper's novel of refusing-to-pass, *Iola Leroy* (1892) (xxii). Although Gates's work is concerned primarily with African-American literature, "signifyin(g)" can be applied productively to black writers who "revise texts in the Western tradition" (xxii) (with *Clotel*, of course, Brown was himself signifyin(g) on Lydia Maria Child's short story, "The Quadroons" [1842]). By extension, it can also be a useful framework for considering the influence of African-American linguistic traditions on white writers. Indeed, in *Was Huck Black?* (1993), Fishkin draws extensively on Gates's concept of "signifyin(g)" in recovering Twain's indebtedness to African-American voices. As she observes towards the end of the book, "Almost as little attention has been paid to Twain's influence on African-American voices as to the influence of African-American voices on Twain" (137). It is with this latter relation that this essay concerns itself.

What, then, is the particular appeal of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* for Chase-Riboud? After all, several critics have pointed out the irresolvable tensions in Twain's novel, the fact that he seems to both undermine and advocate the notion that "black blood" will out. Frustratingly, he appears to emphasize the importance of environment in shaping character while simultaneously suggesting the innateness of blackness (Mitchell 296-97; Howe 497). Chase-Riboud's interest in Twain's novel is signalled early on by her use in *The President's Daughter* of two epigraphs which derive from *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.<sup>5</sup> The first of these bears reproducing in full:

By the fiction created by herself [...] deceptions intended solely for others gradually grew into self-deceptions as well; the little counterfeit rift of separation between imitation-slave and imitation-master widened and widened, and became an abyss, and a very real one – and on one side of it, Roxy, the dupe of her own deceptions, and on the other stood her child – her accepted and recognized master.

Imitation for Twain, according to Sundquist, had "multiple ramifications":

It pointed to the ironies that miscegenation introduced into any variable doctrine of equality; it governed the shadowy middle ground between nature (genetics) and nurture (environment) on which Twain staged his inquiry into the behaviors of mastery and subservience; and it defined, again, the shared territory of his narrative's own "fiction" and the racial "fiction" of American constitutional law and custom. (229)

Similarly, for Chase-Riboud, the trope of imitation enables her to expose the hypocrisy of Jefferson's personal "doctrine of equality": that the man who claimed that "all men are created equal" could also be a slaveholder; that the man who quantified a slave as a mere three-fifths of a person could become involved in a relationship of some thirty years with one of his own and sire her seven children.

In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Chambers's retort to Roxy's calling him an "imitation nigger" is that "Bofe of us is imitation white – dat's what we is – en pow'ful good imitation too – yah-yah-yah! – we don't 'mount to noth'n' as imitation niggers" (35). In *The President's Daughter*, Harriet's brother Eston wonders, "were we imitation Negroes or imitation whites



or bad imitations of both? I suppose we were imitation whites, because as imitation Negroes, we didn't amount to anything" (419). The similarities between the two quotations beg the following question: by drawing extensively upon a famously flawed and troubling text, does Chase-Riboud wind up in an equally impossible, if differently so, situation to that of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*? Put another way, do Chase-Riboud's revisions of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and her own *Sally Hemings* in *The President's Daughter* represent enough of what Gates calls "a signal difference" (xxiv) to ensure that history is *not* simply repeating itself?

### Twinned Texts?

One of the key means by which Chase-Riboud indicates her fascination with *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is by her homage to Twain's use of actual (Luigi/Angelo Capello) and metaphorical (Chambers/Tom Driscoll) twins and doubles. *The President's Daughter* features real twins, Thance and Thor Wellington, both of whom Harriet marries, and who are so alike that even Harriet has trouble telling them apart (222). She also bears twin sons, Madison and James, for Thance. Indeed, Harriet's romantic relationship with twins might be interpreted as an example of history repeating itself, both in a genealogical and literary sense. For if Tom (the master) and Chambers (the slave) from *Pudd'nhead Wilson* are "putative half-brothers," as Susan Gillman describes them (1), then Martha Wayles Jefferson (the mistress) and Sally Hemings (the slave) are actual half-sisters, with both of whom Harriet's father becomes romantically involved. Chase-Riboud deploys other symbolic twins – but actual half-sisters – to point up the doubling of Jefferson's slave and free families. Maria Cosway, with whom Jefferson reputedly had a relationship during his period in France (1784 to 1789), confuses Harriet for *her* half-sister, Martha "Patsy" Jefferson, when they meet in Italy in 1826 (181). Indeed, upon her return to Monticello, to be with her dying father, Harriet herself sees Patsy as her "twin weighted with thirty years" (209).

Chase-Riboud draws all of this twinning together in an extended passage towards the end of the novel:

It was you Father, your fiction that made impostors and confidence men of us all – Eston and Beverly, who doubled for white; Adrian Petit, who doubled for fictitious aristocracy; Thomas, who doubled as Woodston [sic], then tripled as a Union spy, then quadrupled as a loyal white Confederate; Thenia, who doubled as my slave; Mama, who doubled as your wife; Thor, who doubled as Thance; sisters who doubled as wives; wives as slaves; slaves as mistresses; daughters as aunts; sisters-in-law as lovers; sons as lackeys. (414)<sup>6</sup>

For Harriet, the duplicity of her (founding) father is responsible for inaugurating generations of real or metaphorical doubles. Chase-Riboud's use of the word *impostor* may be significant here because, as Gillman argues, "Whereas twinning or doubling suggests merely mathematical division, imposture leads to a kind of logical vicious circle. Since 'posture' already implies posing or faking, 'imposture' is the pose of a pose, the fake of a fake: the word implies no possible return to any point of origin" (5-6). This "vicious circle," this deferral of origins, suggests the cyclical nature of history, or the possibility that it is endlessly repeating itself.

Significantly, twinning in *The President's Daughter* extends beyond the biological and into the textual. When Harriet marries the first of the twins, an advertisement for a runaway slave appears on the reverse side of the newspaper page on which her wedding announcement is printed. Every time she takes out the clipping, "the other stared back at me like a twin" (232). Similarly, Harriet's weddings to Thance (232) and Thor (293) coincide with important legislation on runaway slaves. The first is the Personal Liberty Law of 1826, which made kidnapping a fugitive slave a felony in the State of Pennsylvania. The second, in 1842, is the Supreme Court decision on *Prigg v. Pennsylvania*, which overturned the 1826 law and restored the Fugitive Slave Act. In Chase-Riboud's novel, *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* is thus the "dark double," to borrow Sundquist's term, of the Personal Liberty Law just as the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling of 1896 "brought to a climax the series of Supreme Court

decisions, legislative maneuvers, and developments in sociological theory that had already created the atmosphere in which Twain's wrenching text was composed" (226, 228). The interchangeability of biological and textual twins in *The President's Daughter* reinforces the parallel between actual and historical (Jefferson/Hemings) and literary (Twain/Chase-Riboud) genealogies on which Chase-Riboud insists throughout.

Underlining her deployment of the twin motif and her nods to Twain, Chase-Riboud imagines Harriet's story as a drama of history repeating itself by linking the related oppositions of nature/nurture and fate/free will. What, after all, is determinism if not history repeating itself, one's ancestry exerting an insurmountable degree of influence over one's own actions? Twins provide an opportunity to test such questions. Francis Galton, whose work was read by and demonstrably influenced Twain, wrote in 1876 that twins afford "means of distinguishing between the effects of tendencies received at birth, and of those that were imposed by the circumstances of their after lives; in other words, between the effects of nature and of nurture" (391).<sup>7</sup> By switching the almost-identical Tom and Chambers, this is exactly the experiment that Twain carries out in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.

The racial passing story has always engaged with the notion of fate versus free will on ambivalent terms. In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Tom and Chambers are passed by Roxy. Theirs is involuntary passing. On the other hand, to choose to pass – to refuse to allow one's African-American ancestry to determine one's economic and social status – is, ostensibly, an act of free will. However, as Wald reminds us, "such choice occurs within the context of a negotiation of categories that are authorized by racial ideology and quite literally mandated by the state" (187). Meanwhile, a recurring fear in passing narratives is that of "atavism," literally "great-grandfather-ism," a descendant's "surprising resemblance to grand-parents or more remote ancestors rather than to parents" (Sollors 49), an occurrence over which the

passer has no control.<sup>8</sup> Even when the passer wilfully decides to pass, therefore, his or her actions may yet be circumscribed by external forces.

Consistent with most passing narratives, then, Chase-Riboud approaches the idea of fate versus free will with some ambivalence. On one hand, she imagines Harriet as undergoing experiences similar to those of her mother, Sally Hemings, and her uncle, James Hemings, as if this has been determined providentially. On the other, she emphasizes Harriet's desire to seek out and know her own past. When Jefferson asks a final favor of Petit to accompany Harriet on her journey from Monticello to Philadelphia, Petit realizes with horror that he "was to escort the daughter out of slavery just as in Paris I had escorted the mother out of slavery thirty-five years before" (41). After she weds Thor, Harriet realizes that although she vowed never to resemble her mother, "like her not only was [she] still a slave, [she] was a slave who had taken [her] brother-in-law as [her] husband" (293). Equally, James Hemings, narrating from beyond the grave, observes that Harriet is "just like the mother she never wanted to be" (362). Meanwhile, Petit notes the many similarities between Harriet and her uncle (44, 93, 115). Like James, moreover, Harriet pleads with Thomas Jefferson to formally manumit her so that she will not have "to steal" herself (15, 50). Otherwise, she's a "fugitive slave, a criminal," while James perceives himself to be "a criminal, an outlaw" for the same reasons (50).

Just after her arrival in Philadelphia, Petit takes Harriet to see the building in which her uncle James lived and died, after which, he claims, the site "is no longer part of [her] biography" (97). Harriet's decision to leave her then-fiancé, Thance, and embark on a tour of Europe in the company of Dorcas Willowpole, an anti-slavery campaigner, is a conscious choice to retrace her mother's footsteps. If Sally Hemings sailed first to London with Maria Jefferson, staying with former United States President John Adams and his wife and travelling on to Paris in the company of Petit, so in crossing the English Channel Harriet

chooses "the route Adrian Petit had taken with Maman and Maria" (167). She visits Maria Cosway, now a nun in Italy, who offers Harriet the gold locket given to her by Jefferson, assuring her that: "It belongs to you. To your biography" (189). Another crucial artifact in Harriet's biography is the "razor-sharp stiletto" her mother gives her when she is sixteen years old, after she has barely survived the unwelcome sexual advances of a white carpenter called Sykes (8). The stiletto belonged to her uncle James. When Adrian decides to return to France after the deaths of Sally Hemings and Martha Jefferson Randolph in 1836, Harriet offers him the stiletto as a parting gift. As it turns out, it was Adrian who gave James Hemings the dagger, as a Christmas present exactly forty years previously (255). The stiletto thus reveals the cyclical nature of history, having passed from Adrian to James to Sally, to Harriet and then back to Adrian. The notion of history repeating itself at a formal level is underscored by the allusions Chase-Riboud makes in *The President's Daughter* to her own novel *Sally Hemings*. For example, conversations between Harriet and her brother and mother that appear in *Sally Hemings* (368-70) are reproduced almost verbatim in *The President's Daughter* (4, 8-9). Equally, James Hemings's determination not to steal himself is quoted identically in both novels (*Sally Hemings* 169-70; *The President's Daughter* 50).

While she may initially appear to assert the supremacy of destiny over conscious choice in her narrative, in her revisions to both *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *Sally Hemings* Chase-Riboud exercises her own authorial free will in order to change the course of (literary) history. For instance, in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, as in several other passing stories, Tom Driscoll's white paternity is obscured and is only revealed after the man's death. Roxy tells her son that his father, Colonel Cecil Burleigh Essex, was of "ole Virginny stock. Fust famblies, he wuz" (44). In *The President's Daughter*, however, Chase-Riboud "outs" Thomas Jefferson, a member of one of the First Families of Virginia, as the father of Sally Hemings's children. Indeed, Eston Hemings Jefferson, Harriet's brother, includes the initials F. F. V., P.

F. W. (First Families of Virginia, Passed for White) after his name (416). As Twain explains, "The F. F. V. was born a gentleman; his highest duty in life was to watch over that great inheritance and keep it unsmirched. He must keep his honor spotless" (61). By adding the "P. F. W." to Eston's title, Chase-Riboud reinforces Twain's ironic suggestion that the bloodline of the F. F. V. was often not as racially "unsmirched" or "spotless" as it might have been. In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, moreover, "the one-sixteenth of [Roxy] which was black out-voted the other fifteen parts and made her a negro" (7). In *The President's Daughter*, by contrast, Chase-Riboud grants Eston Hemings the authority to vote "the fifteen-sixteenths of me a white majority over the one-sixteenth of me that makes me in fact and fiction something the republic invented" (418). Unlike Chambers, whose one-thirty-second "black blood" makes him "by a fiction of law and custom a negro" (Twain 7), Eston "thrice crossed and recrossed the color line, changing like a chameleon," thus "negating the fact and fiction of his race with one blink of his baby blue eyes" (*The President's Daughter* 416).

The assertion of Jefferson as the father of Hemings's children becomes, if anything, overdetermined in *The President's Daughter*: each chapter opens with a Jeffersonian epigraph which testifies to the absent presence of the paternal figure throughout Harriet's life. This contrasts with *Sally Hemings*, whose chapter epigraphs are derived from multiple and varied sources (John and Abigail Adams, Thomas Carlyle, and so on), including, but by no means privileging, those of Jefferson. Equally, Chase-Riboud introduces some key changes to the experiences of her respective protagonists from 1979 to 1994. In *Sally Hemings* and *The President's Daughter*, both Sally and Harriet, respectively, attend the slave auction held at Monticello after the death of Thomas Jefferson. While Sally, freed by Martha Jefferson Randolph, regrets not selling the locket given to her by Jefferson portraitist John Thrumbull in order to buy one of her own relatives (*Sally Hemings* 392), Harriet does manage to buy two of the slaves – the wife of Burwell, a slave freed in Jefferson's will, and Harriet's cousin

Thenia Hemings, who accompanies her to Philadelphia (*The President's Daughter* 217). In so doing, Chase-Riboud suggests that Harriet is a more empowered mulatta figure than her mother.

### **"Make Upon the Window the Fingerprints That Will Hang You"**

Like *The President's Daughter*, Twain's novel employs a historical setting, the action taking place predominantly in 1853, the publication year of that other "'fictional' biography" of Harriet Hemings, Brown's *Clotel*. If historiographic metafiction is "a critical reworking" of the past, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*'s own historical setting serves to destabilise and defer endlessly any comfortable sense of "the past" that it might seem to represent (Hutcheon 4). Indeed, it could be argued that both works simultaneously return to the past *and* anticipate the future. Four years after the appearance of Chase-Riboud's novel, of course, DNA results confirming Thomas Jefferson's paternity of at least one of Sally Hemings's children were published in the scientific journal *Nature*. Meanwhile, if David "Pudd'nhead" Wilson's experiments in palmistry belong rightfully to the late-nineteenth-century moment in which the novel was produced, its plot, featuring a murder case solved by recourse to fingerprints, now appears almost prescient.

The second epigraph from *Pudd'nhead Wilson* in *The President's Daughter*, "Make upon the window the fingerprints that will hang you," signals Chase-Riboud's preoccupation with Twain's fingerprint motif throughout the novel. She attributes to Thance Wellington the early discoveries concerning fingerprinting upon which Twain draws in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.<sup>9</sup> Thance dies in 1843, but his brother, Thor, posthumously publishes Thance's research, so that his "thin volume" appears "on the shelves of the library next to Francis Galton's definitive monograph published the same year" (305). The irony of this is that, as Sundquist observes, "Galton went on to achieve his greatest renown as a promoter of eugenics which advocated the progressive breeding of an improved society and which in the American climate of the

early twentieth century automatically took the form of nativist theories of protection against the threat of race suicide through miscegenation and immigration" (251-52). For Sundquist, Twain's use of fingerprints in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* seems "to mock the theory that segregation was rooted in organic laws susceptible to proof by the new scientific and sociological study of heredity" (252). However, there is no escaping the fact that both the "black blood" and the murderous guilt of "Tom Driscoll" are revealed by recourse to fingerprints. The extent to which Twain made this narrative choice in order to "mock" it is open to debate.

In *The President's Daughter*, Thance tells Harriet, "Identity is not a matter of change or chance. It is a fixed particularity given at birth to every human being. And it is inimitable" (77). This recalls the eponymous lawyer's observations of fingerprints in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*:

Every human being carries with him from his cradle to his grave certain physical marks which do not change their character, and by which he can always be identified – and that without shade of doubt or question. These marks are his signature, his physiological autograph, so to speak, and this autograph cannot be counterfeited, nor can he disguise it or hide it away, nor can it become illegible by the wear and mutations of time. (115)

Notwithstanding these echoes, Chase-Riboud does, in fact, allow Harriet to evade the tyranny of fingerprints. When she becomes involved in a chemical accident in her then brother-in-law's laboratory, her fingerprints are destroyed, her "blank fingertips" ensuring that her identity is "erased" (279). Not only can fingerprints be destroyed in *The President's Daughter*, they can also be re-constructed. When Harriet decides, after Thance's death during a research expedition to Africa, to marry his twin brother Thor, she claims that the happiness she will enjoy with him will not be the same "as with Thance, or its shadow or imitation. From Africa, there would be new fingerprints" (293).

Ultimately, though, Chase-Riboud's treatment of fingerprints is, like her reworking of Twain's fate versus free will theme, ambivalent. Just as Harriet feels both "sad and jubilant" at the erasure of her fingerprints (279), so she finds that she has been so successful at passing



as white that even when she attempts to confess her "true" origins to her granddaughter, Roxanne refuses to believe her and prefers to think her grandmother is doting. In a different way to "Tom Driscoll," as Harriet perceives it, she has been "hung" by her own fingerprints (446). Indeed, like Roxy, she has become "the dupe of her own deceptions" (Twain 18). If, in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, there seems to be no way out of the nature/nurture dilemma, in *The President's Daughter* Harriet is either circumscribed by her racial and gender identity or she has no identity whatsoever. To suggest this, Chase-Riboud includes a mirror scene – one of the defining tropes of the racial passing story – towards the end of the novel. For instance, in James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), after his schoolteacher publicly designates him as "non-white" the narrator rushes home to peer at himself in the looking glass (7-8). In passing narratives, the mirror thus represents the subject's uncanny confrontation with a racial identity that does not seem to correspond to his or her physical appearance. However, when seventy-five-year-old Harriet gazes into her mirror, she sees "no reflection of anyone in it"; "there was nobody"; she has passed so effectively that she is "invisible" (446).

In *The President's Daughter*, then, Chase-Riboud's revisions to *Pudd'nhead Wilson* do not represent enough of a "signal difference" to ensure that history is not repeating itself, but this is precisely her point. Reworking aspects of Twain's novel does yield some empowering results for her mulatta protagonist but, in the end, Harriet – like Tom and Chambers – winds up in a no-win situation. Earlier in this article, I suggested a link between Twain's Roxy and Chase-Riboud's Roxanne. Perhaps a more telling connection is that between Roxy and Harriet. If, as Carolyn Porter argues persuasively, Roxy's baby-switching both subverts and reiterates the white slaveholding patriarchy (126), so "the social practice of passing" in which Harriet engages "is thoroughly invested in the logic of the system it attempts to subvert" (Robinson 237). Perhaps the appeal of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* for Chase-Riboud, and for

contemporary African-American novelists-of-passing more generally, thus lies in its structural and thematic ambivalence. Looking back to the 1850s as it looks forward to the present day, the internal tensions of the text reflect the conflict between Twain's own "sensitivity to racial injustice and his internalized racial bias" (Howe 515). Similarly, the racial passing story, seemingly anachronistic and out modish, re-emerges at the end of the twentieth century in response to the sustained ambivalence – fear and celebration, revulsion and fascination – provoked by the mixed-race subject in American society and culture more widely.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This is the case in studies by Kathleen Pfeiffer (1892-1929), Mar Gallego (1912-1932), Carlyle Van Thompson (1900-1932), and Stephen J. Belluscio (1891-1931).

<sup>2</sup> The epigraph to *Erasure* – "I could never tell a lie that anybody would doubt, nor a truth that anybody would believe" – is a quotation from Twain's *Following the Equator* (1897). In that work, of course, Twain attributes his chapter heading quotations to the fictional character, Pudd'nhead Wilson, from his own 1894 novel. For a discussion of the Compton Tannenberry/Franz von Compton anecdote, see Moynihan.

<sup>3</sup> See Friedman for a helpful discussion on how "influence" and "intertextuality" often represent "a diachronic conflict between generations or a synchronic confrontation between European and American modes of analysis" (146).

<sup>4</sup> In disagreements that were often divided along gender lines, such scholars debated amongst themselves the best means of achieving this, particularly with regard to the merits of applying theory to African-American literature. Interestingly, the "tragic mulatta" played a key role in such disputes. In his introduction to *Workings of the Spirit*, for example, Baker delineates what he terms Black Power (theoretical) versus Black Studies (historical) approaches to African-American women's writing and implicitly creates a three-way analogy between turn-of-the-twentieth-century writers (such as Pauline Hopkins), their mulatta protagonists, and non-theorising African-American women scholars, all of whom Baker claims "worry, worry, worry about the approbation of a white other" (19).

<sup>5</sup> The epigraphs from *Pudd'nhead Wilson* are the second and last of three. The first epigraph is James Fenimore Cooper's description of Cora Munroe from *Last of the Mohicans* (1826). Cora Munroe is, according to Werner Sollors, thought to be the first "tragic mulatta" in American literary history (239).

<sup>6</sup> Incidentally, Chase-Riboud's tripling and quadrupling of identities in *The President's Daughter* may reflect her distinctive postmodern sensibility compared with that of Twain. As Marcus argues, while *Pudd'nhead Wilson* features examples of doubled, divided and crossed

selves, the last of which challenges most radically the reader's assumptions regarding the "sharply bounded self," Twain "does not exploit the dimension of multiplicity" beyond "two" that would have placed the text "on the verge of contemporary critiques of the self" (194, 209).

<sup>7</sup> Galton's views on twins' ability to shed light on nature/nurture persisted long into the twentieth century. Celebrated psychologist John Money (1921-2006) was a proponent of the importance of nurture in establishing gender behaviour. Canadian identical boy twins provided Money with the opportunity to prove this. After one of the twins, David Reimer, underwent a circumcision operation aged eight months that resulted in a major portion of his penis being burnt away, his parents contacted Money who recommended raising David as a girl and aligning his genitalia to reflect his feminine identity. However, as a child, David (now known as Brenda) resisted socialisation as a girl and at the age of fourteen, after learning of his past, decided to receive masculine hormone treatments. For a discussion of the John/Joan case, see Butler 58-75.

<sup>8</sup> The fear of atavism is explored in, to give just two examples, Kate Chopin's short story, "Desirée's Baby" (1893) and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929). In Chopin's story, when the eponymous protagonist gives birth to a dark-skinned baby, her beloved husband accuses her of being black and banishes her and their child from their home. After she leaves, Armand discovers that it is he whose "blood" is tainted, his deceased mother being of African-American ancestry. In Larsen's novella, Clare Kendry, passing as white and married to a white man, reveals the anxiety she underwent before the birth of her daughter, fearing she would be dark (168).

<sup>9</sup> According to Railton, Twain acquired a copy of Francis Galton's *Finger Prints* in November 1892.

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